

Government, Neo-liberal Media, and Education in Canada

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Despite the differences in their purposes and orientations, governments and the media typically forge uneasy but mutually advantageous relationships. This article describes the relationship between the media and one provincial government, focusing on education. It devotes specific attention to the practices used by both media and government to achieve their respective ends.

Key words: media, government, educational policy, neo-liberalism

En dépit du fait que leurs buts et orientations diffèrent, les gouvernements et les médias tissent des relations à la fois difficiles mais mutuellement avantageuses. Dans son article, l'auteur décrit les liens entre les médias et un gouvernement provincial en mettant en relief le discours sur l'éducation. Il décrit notamment les méthodes utilisées à la fois par les médias et le gouvernement pour atteindre leurs objectifs respectifs.

Mots clés : médias, gouvernement, politique en matière d'éducation, néolibéralisme.

Governments, teacher organizations, parents, and other interest groups use print and electronic media to initiate, frame, and respond to educational policies.¹ In this article, I have described the relationship between the media and provincial governments in education, paying specific attention to the practices used by both media and government to achieve their respective ends.

This article complements Levin's² insightful examination of the relations between government and the media. Like Levin, I base many of my comments on my experience as deputy minister (chief civil servant) in a Canadian provincial ministry of education.³ Given some overlap between our tenures in those positions, a comparison between

this article and Levin's should reveal interesting similarities and differences.

Some of the differences arise naturally from the different provincial contexts in which we worked. Others arise as a consequence of the different phenomena that we describe, the emphasis we ascribe to particular impressions, differences in purpose, and differences in interpretation. Levin describes the means that governments employ to address the media and discusses three of the complaints frequently levelled at them: the limited range of their temporal interest, their tendency to simplify issues, and their proclivity for assigning blame. He appreciates the inextricable relations between government and the media, but stops short of describing the strategies and tactics the government he served used to influence the media's treatment of educational issues. It is these dimensions that I emphasize in this article.

THE NEO-LIBERAL CANADIAN MEDIA CONTEXT

Governments and the media frame the information they present in accordance with their ideological inclinations. Provincial communications staff members often talk about the *message box*, referring to communicating messages consistent with government's position on the issue or topic at hand. Staying within the box means communicating clearly the main message and avoiding comments that deviate or distract from the message government wishes to convey.

As is the case with political parties, the various media have message boxes as well. Although there are notable exceptions, commercial Canadian media express predominantly neo-liberal values.

- The economic interests of individuals should not be fettered by considerations of social equity.
- Choice, as a manifestation of freedom, is a virtue in its own right and the means by which individuals are able to express approval or disapproval in the market.
- People are better served through private entrepreneurialism than by public regulation or provision of services.

- Productive efficiency is the primary – perhaps singular – criterion by which any public policy should be judged.

This list is not surprising. A substantial number of Canadians subscribe to neo-liberal values, at least in the abstract. Commercial media are themselves beneficiaries of neo-liberal messages. Narratives that depart from neo-liberal interpretations occur in the media, but their occurrence is less frequent and their presentation more muted than ones that fit the dominant interpretive and ideological framework. It is largely unnecessary to use heavy-handed editorial regulation to ensure that the media use a neo-liberal interpretive framework, although such regulation is not completely absent. The media achieve control through recruitment and retention practices. Those who own and manage commercial media employ and promote persons with values similar to their own.

During the past decade of funding freezes and reductions, commercial Canadian media have featured stories implying that the Canadian public school system has sufficient resources. According to the message box, if these resources were better used they might be sufficient to meet the demands that Canadians have for their public schools. The problem is not so much one of adequate resources as the need for fiscal and educational accountability. And, if audits and testing will not by themselves improve public schools, increased choice and competition will.⁴

“Providing parents with standardized test scores and more information about school performance is useful only if it is accompanied by an ability to choose schools.” *National Post* writer, Anne Marie Owens, was quoting British Columbia school trustee, Katherine Wagner. Ms. Wagner is a board member of the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, an organization founded by opponents to teachers being able to organize under the labour code. The article quotes Wagner as saying:

Choice can be used to determine best practices, meet parental preference, provide services for children who are not well served by their neighbourhood school, provide a better match between student/programs/teachers and make more efficient use of dwindling resources.⁵

Canadian media have successfully identified the anxieties that many have about Canada's economic future. Many politicians have successfully mined this same vein of anxiety for political and ideological advantage. Such messages have misrepresented data that indicate that public education is actually doing quite well and gradually improving; fed the media's voracious appetite for comparisons; and used anxiety to fuel the desire for choice and competition within the public school system and between the public system and private alternatives.⁶

In 1980s and 1990s when the Canadian economy was in recession and the economies of Germany and Japan were ascendant, the message boxes of business leaders and politicians who knew better, or should have known better, blamed the failings of the Canadian economy on public schools – especially poor preparation for work and illiteracy— instead of poor economic management, low levels of research and development, and the failure to provide sufficient workplace training.

Comparisons were made between Canadian workers and the workers in Japan and Germany. These business leaders and politicians averred that Canadian workers were less productive than their counterparts in other countries because they lacked the skills and knowledge of the German and Japanese workers by virtue of their education.

Canadian political and business leaders visited schools in Germany and Japan, sometimes accompanied by the media. Certain that the Germans and Japanese had much to teach Canadians about education, they returned with ideas they thought would improve public schooling and, in turn, Canada's economy. For example, those enamoured of the performance of the Japanese economy attempted to connect its success to the fact that Japanese students spent more days in school, received tutoring in after-school classes, wrote standardized tests, wore uniforms, participated more in group activities than individual pursuits, attended schools with large classes in which group recitation was common, had relatively modest classroom and school libraries, and were streamed in schools that were rigidly ranked.

By the mid-1990s, the German economy had slowed, and the Japanese economy bordered on collapse. Both were experiencing the vicissitudes of a market economy. In addition, Japan was suffering the

consequences of fiscal mismanagement so large that, for a while at least, it threatened economies around the world. The media became silent about applying the lessons learned from Germany's and Japan's educational systems to Canada's public schools.

Politicians and media do not readily acknowledge that Canadian public schools perform well on international comparisons, that the number of graduates has increased and school leavers decreased by more than ten per cent in the past fifteen years, and that the post secondary participation rate in Canada is roughly twice the average of the countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

"There is little disagreement that Canadian public schools are in serious need of improvement," proclaimed a Calgary Herald editorial responding to my suggestion that Canada establish a federal department of education. The editorial averred that there was a crisis of quality in Canadian public schooling. Like many such articles, public schools were regarded as productively inefficient because they were allegedly bureaucratic, monopolistic, and unresponsive to parental and public interests.

The absence of federal involvement is not causing the crisis of underperformance and underachievement in public schools. The real problem is the public school monopolies, which are shielded from competition and resistant to change.

Charter schools, tax credits, home schooling, private schools, virtual learning and vouchers are what's needed to create the dynamism that will improve the education system. It's far better to have 10 provincial education ministries, which can innovate freely, observe and copy each others' best practices, than an Ottawa-run, top-down experiment.⁷

Schools were encouraged to raise money through what was euphemistically called *charitable gaming*. In what might appear to be a contradiction, our "unresponsive, bureaucratic, monopolistic, and productively inefficient," public schools have been encouraged to market Canadian education to international students or establish schools overseas.

In the August 2002 on-line version of the *Globe and Mail*, journalist Margaret Wenté devoted an entire column to a parent who had decided to move her child from a Toronto public school to a private school. Wenté quoted the parent as saying, "I truly believe in public education, but everyone's brought their politics into the school. They're turning my kid's education into a three-ring circus."⁸

Wenté catalogued a series of events that, cumulatively, forced this parent's decision: that her son would be in a class of thirty-six students; that a group of parents had taken a kindergarten class to the office of their member of the provincial assembly to protest the funding cuts in Toronto; that her son had allegedly spent three afternoons as part of a school project drawing a picture of an unmarried couple living together. The column also listed other events that contributed to the parent's decision to leave the public system, including a two-month social studies unit devoted to "children's rights" and conflict resolution training.

Canadians have a strong appetite for news about their public schools, and the drama – yes drama – provided by the conflicts about public schooling help to feed that appetite. Canadian media attempt to satisfy the public appetite for news about schooling with a diet of bad news stories supplemented by the occasional good news story celebrating the home team or athlete. The media often use the image of a glass half empty to create conflict that appeals to and builds an audience. Improving graduation rates and test results become stories about "not improving enough" or "not doing as well as" (pick one) the district, province, or country next door, or all of the above.

In Canadian society, information that counts as news is typically constructed into a narrative or story structure. The narrative structure of the news casts people as heroes, villains, or victims; issues are framed as conflicts between opposing forces with one of the forces often cast in the role of hero and the other of villain. Sometimes the story involves one or more victims.

The media have featured articles and columns like Wenté's to imply the school system has resources that, if not devoted to frivolous activities, should be sufficient to do the job. They have suggested that the problem is not so much one of adequate resources as the need for

accountability, fiscal and educational, as well as the need for more competition and school choice.

A narrative structure creates unity among events separated by time and space, implies intentionality to the actions of the participants involved in the events beyond that which they may have had, and creates the impression that the separate events share a common meaning—thus providing a single interpretation to the many events.⁹ Interpretations that are repeated with frequency become accepted understandings among those for whom alternative interpretations are not evident.¹⁰

It is easy to cast children as victims in stories about public schooling. Children are inherently vulnerable. It is equally easy to find villains in the conflicts affecting public schooling. Self-interested or negligent teachers or teacher unions fit the bill as do parsimonious and uncaring governments. It is easy to create a dramatic story by pitting defenceless parents and their children against the monolithic educational bureaucracy or self-interested teacher unions.

MAKING THE NEWS

News, to paraphrase Trina McQueen, a former executive producer of *The National*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's English Language nightly news program, is where you have a crew and equipment. What gets counted as news in Canadian society is information and events that are accessible to the apparatus of news gathering and dissemination. Most news media deploy their personnel to locations where they anticipate news will be made. Among the most prominent locations are the centres of political and economic power.

Governments are the main purveyors of news. That is, not only do governments figure prominently in the news, they are also the major producers and distributors of information that gets codified as news. Because investigative techniques are costly and the possibilities for error and misjudgement increase in ambiguous situations—especially when the clock is ticking—most major news media rely heavily on the information made available by and attributable to government sources. Government provides a steady flow of information that can be attributed to people in positions of authority.

Two assumptions reinforce the media's dependence upon government and governmental sources for news. The first is the assumption that those who exercise authority in political, economic, or social institutions may speak authoritatively about issues and events. The second is the related assumption that people who occupy the topmost positions in the institution are more authoritative than those below them.¹¹

Governments reinforce this assumption. A civil servant's well-informed account might provide more information, but such occurrences are comparatively rare for two reasons. First, it is not appropriate for civil servants to offer their opinions about the policies of the governments they serve. Second, elected officials would not look favourably upon a civil servant who usurped their public profile.

In decisions about which issues will and will not be addressed by the media, the media themselves figure prominently. Most newsrooms monitor closely what issues other electronic and print media agencies are addressing. The media often choose to disseminate information gathered by other news sources. Although they have diminished over the past 20 years as a consequence of increasing concentration of ownership and convergence,¹² to secure themselves from failing to report an important story covered by a media rival, those who gather the news travel in packs, following those whom they regard as major newsmakers.¹³

Government communications departments monitor the media. The way in which communications departments are organized varies from government to government and from administration to administration, providing an indication of the relative autonomy accorded ministries and ministers. Some governments centralize the function as an adjunct to the premier's office. When I was deputy minister, communication was primarily decentralized, although a central agency with its own deputy minister (who reported directly to the premier) attempted to ensure coordination and message consistency, and arranged that certain functions such as polling would be performed centrally.

Whether managed centrally or dispersed to individual ministries or departments, governments monitor the media vigilantly as barometers of public sentiment. They try to anticipate issues to which they might be required to respond, and to assert tactical advantage in the provision of

information to influence perception and understanding, what some call spin.

The Director of Communication in the Ministry of Education presided over a staff of 18 communications officers. Roughly half of them were responsible for “good news” and the others for “issues management,” an apt description of their responsibilities. Each morning a communications staff member would arrive at work at 6:30 or 7:00 to assemble the material that had been broadcast or published by local and national media during the previous 24 hours on matters pertinent to the Ministry’s jurisdiction. The staff member would disseminate an electronic copy of the clippings to senior ministry staff and political officials.

Communications staff would decide which of the issues receiving the media’s attention required the preparation of a document containing a *précis* of the issue, the media outlets in which the issue had been addressed, relevant background material, and talking points that the Minister might wish to make should she or he be approached by the media. The preparation of “points to note” or “minister’s position notes” was relatively easy for issues for which policy was clearly established. Complex issues sometimes required that program personnel from the sector be consulted or enlisted in developing appropriate responses.

The points-to-note were expected in the Minister’s office by 10:00 a.m. To meet the deadline, staff had to obtain information and secure approvals from program area representatives, from the assistant deputy minister responsible for the program area, and from the deputy minister in less than two hours.

Such material is essential support for a minister on a daily basis. It is used to prepare a minister to respond to the various media and to the opposition’s questions during question period when the legislature is in session. Possession of the “points to note” for issues likely to arise is particularly important on those days when cabinet would meet because on those days reporters gathered to await the conclusion of the cabinet meeting to scrum ministers returning to their offices.

“Points to note” are also indispensable to the Minister during estimates, the questioning to which ministers are subjected when the legislature considers the budgets of their ministries. Politically sensitive

issues or issues bearing upon matters of policy are the source of many of the questions put to a minister in defending the ministry's spending priorities for the coming year. The "points to note" were carefully indexed and accompanied the minister into the legislature so that, should a question be asked about an issue addressed by the media, the relevant note could be handed to the minister as she or he rose to respond to the question.

Governments use a variety of vehicles to advance their own agendas, including the preparation of letters from a minister to an editor, recorded commentaries, or articles for the "op-ed" page. The preparation of these items is also the responsibility of communications officers, although they less often use these vehicles.

The "good news" side of the communication shop in the Ministry of Education was responsible for initiating communication with the various media. Their responsibilities included preparing press releases and arranging ministerial announcements. An important dimension of such events was arranging for significant stakeholders to express approval of the minister's action(s) in the press release. They sometimes made arrangements for these stakeholders to be present at the minister's announcement so that they were available to the media. Communications officers are also responsible for identifying and making arrangements for a suitable venue for an announcement and for preparing and disseminating "media advisories" alerting the media to the timing, location, and nature of the impending announcement.

As mentioned earlier, news media anticipate locations where news is likely to happen. Assignment editors maintain records of upcoming and regularly occurring events so that they can deploy their news-gathering resources efficiently. Thus, representatives of the media are more in evidence at the ceremony where cabinet members are sworn to their responsibilities, when budgets are released, or on the day of the week when cabinet meets than they are on other days or on days when there are no regularly scheduled events.

Most people want to make a good impression, a reality especially true of governments that depend on the electorate for their legitimacy and support. As is true of many people, governments attempt to exercise control over how they are perceived. When governments

attempt to do this in response to situations, their efforts earn the pejorative label *spin* – often deservedly so.¹⁴ Spin is impression management. Governments do a wide range of things under the ambit of impression management, including the deliberate distortion of information and the derogation of opposing points of view as special interests and worse.

Governments can use the timing of a news release strategically. Forced to make unpleasant announcements or to release reports with damaging information, governments will on occasion time the release when other events are likely to draw attention away from the unpleasant or unwanted information. A good time is late on Friday afternoons when media representatives are less in evidence.

In 1985, the Vancouver School Board led a media campaign against limits that the provincial government had imposed on school board spending. As a consequence of its proximity to major media outlets and the possession of specialized communications staff, the Vancouver School Board became increasingly successful in mobilizing public attention and opposing the Social Credit Government's restraint program in education. As the School Board's campaign gained momentum, the Social Credit Government decided to push back, using the media to deliver a message to both the Vancouver School Board and the general public. The government decided to exercise its jurisdiction to dismiss the Vancouver School Board trustees and appoint an official trustee to administer the affairs of the School Board and to use the media to give prominence to these actions.

The strategy worked well. Dismissing the Vancouver School Board and appointing an official trustee deflected attention from the adequacy of school funding to a discussion of the propriety of a senior level of government removing a democratically elected subordinate body.

Borrowed from the language of electronic warfare, jamming refers to communications techniques that will limit the effectiveness of an opponent's communication. In 1998, influenced by opinion polls, government had made the decision to respond to the public demand for greater accountability by embarking upon annual testing of students in grades 4, 7, and 10. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) opposed the testing and, in April 1998, issued a staff alert to its

members about the impending tests and about its demands that the Ministry of Education.

- Change the purpose of the Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP) from individual student assessment and program review back to program review only;
 - Administer PLAP on a sample, not a census, basis;
 - Not use coding methods that identify individual students and not produce individual student scores in provincial learning assessments.
- (Retrieved February 14, 2006, from <http://www.bctf.ca/SchoolStaffAlert/archive/1998-99/1998-04-27.html>)

Government did not respond favourably to the BCTF's demands and proceeded with the testing program. Although the BCTF was well aware of the public appetite for testing of the type the government pursued, it had not been aware of the extent to which equity groups – especially the Aboriginal community – were in support of such a regime. The effectiveness of the Federation to mount a public campaign against annual testing was jammed in part by the fact that Aboriginal leaders – and especially Aboriginal educators (e.g., members of the First Nations Education Steering Committee) – were willing to validate the government's initiative. The Federation, which had a long history of social justice activism, found it difficult to mount an effective response to the government's initiative.

Journalists do not always possess sufficient background or acumen to exercise critical judgment about the issue on which they are reporting. For example, in 2002, the *Globe and Mail* ran a story under the headline "Funds Fail to Fuel Higher Test Scores: A Boost in Marks Not Guaranteed."¹⁵ The story reported the results of an analysis of the relationship between school board spending and student achievement as measured by the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP). The report said that the provinces and territories with the four highest operating expenditures per pupil were not among the top performers on the SAIP achievement tests in mathematics and science. Education reporter Kim Honey said the research also "showed that the more school

districts spent in British Columbia, the worse their students fared on B.C.'s Foundation Skills Assessment."

The *Globe and Mail* article concluded with the statement that, "Despite a 23-per-cent increase in expenditures per pupil in the past 20 years, standardized test scores have remained relatively stagnant." The article wanted the reader to connect increased expenditures with better results in science and mathematics. Although it may seem plausible, there is no necessary reason why expenditures and achievement should be related.

A more critical examination would have identified the reasons why they are not related. School board expenditures are based on the cost of many factors. Some school districts spend more on heating and light, more to attract teachers and administrators, more for transportation, or to replace or repair aging schools. Teachers are compensated for the number of years of teaching experience. School boards that have a larger number of experienced teachers have higher salary bills than ones with less experienced teachers. Urban districts such as Vancouver and Toronto have large populations of immigrant students requiring additional assistance to learn English. Other districts have no ESL students. Spending more money for heat, light, transportation, ESL classes, refurbishing schools, and teacher salaries cannot directly translate into better student achievement scores in mathematics and science.

The lack of information or the absence of critical insight about issues allows misinformation to circulate more freely than it should. Knowing that, I embarked on a number of initiatives to attempt to create conditions to counter disinformation and enable greater critical insight about educational issues. With the support of the ministers with whom I worked, the strategy had four components:

- Making certain that all ministry staff were aware of the importance of good media relations and the different needs of various media;
- Ensuring that the media had easy access to the information it wanted;
- Creating a climate in which facts about the province's education system were made available on a regular basis; and

- Preparing the media for understanding information about the education system.

When people are frustrated in getting information or comments about issues they regard as important, they are not likely to look favourably upon the object of their frustration. Making newsworthy information readily available in a timely fashion is insurance against frustrating the media. Open lines of communication also help prevent miscommunication.

When I arrived in government, the Ministry of Education was dispersed over several locations. I learned that space had become available in the building in which most of the ministry staff worked; I decided to move the executive there as well.

Shortly after the move, a television reporter called the communications unit asking about “costly renovations to the deputy minister’s office.” Alert to the potential for embarrassment, the communications staff—which had been relocated on the same floor—immediately contacted my office. I asked for the name of the reporter and called him immediately.

The reporter, who was about a block away outside of the legislature, took the call on his cell phone. I invited him to come over and told him that I would meet him at the elevator. In the meantime, I retrieved the plans for the move together with the cost of the move from our files and went to the elevator. When the reporter arrived, I handed him the plans and costs, and asked if he wanted to photograph the area. Without waiting for direction from the reporter, the camera operator with him switched on the camera and began taping.

I explained my reasons for making the move from one location to the other and invited the reporter and camera operator to come to my office, which had been rumoured to have been renovated at some expense. As we walked from the elevator to the other end of the corridor, I explained whose offices we were passing.

When we arrived at my office, I invited them in. When he noticed my rather modest space, the reporter asked, “This is your office?” “Yes,” I replied. “And this is my new conference table and chairs,” referring to the eight new office chairs surrounding a new table. Pointing to well

worn, but serviceable desk that had been used by seven or eight of my predecessors, I said, "And this is my desk."

Not finding what he had expected, the reporter asked to see the "Executive Board Room." "Sure," I replied. "It's that room we passed on our left as we entered," referring to a narrow windowless room. The camera operator switched off his camera and light and said, "I'm going." He was making his way to the elevator as I invited the reporter to see the remaining offices on the floor. "We're short of time," the reporter said, declining my invitation. The news of taxpayer victimization at the hands of a free-spending civil servant they had come to document never made it to air.

From numerous meetings and correspondence with individuals and groups, I knew that the public was hungry for information about elementary and secondary schooling. I also knew that in the absence of government information, the Fraser Institute (a neo-liberal think tank based in British Columbia) or some other group would feed that appetite with their own information and interpretation.¹⁶ In a very modest way, I hoped to be able to combat their actions with the other components in my strategy.

The second component in my approach to creating an environment more receptive to information was something we called "Facts at a Glance." I borrowed the idea from *The Daily*, Statistics Canada's daily release of information on various topics.

The Ministry of Education did not have the staff or resources to produce a statistical report on a daily basis. Instead we embarked on a more modest schedule of a monthly release of "Facts at a Glance." My thinking was that, if we could get the media and the public accustomed to receiving regular data about elementary and secondary education in BC, their understanding would become more sophisticated.

"Facts at a Glance" was less successful than I had hoped because it appeared too infrequently. If we had been able to increase the frequency with which we made the facts available with a consistent release date, I believe that reporters and the public would have come to anticipate the release. I had hoped that, by routinely providing such information, two things might happen. First, I hoped that the publication of information such as the Fraser Institute's ranking of schools or the release of test data

would become just another in a series of stories rather than attract as much attention as they do. Second, although I did not expect the basic neo-liberal interpretive framework to disappear, I hoped that regular release of information would generate issue frames more favourable to public education. We contextualized information about student progress and school operations in a temporal perspective that allowed a reader to see and appreciate trends in the data and the improvements that had occurred. We also supplemented the data with commentary about both strengths and weaknesses to provide a more complex and balanced presentation. We prepared letters-to-the editor to provide counter-argument about issues in the press (school board funding, for example) and articles for op-ed pages about ministry initiatives (class size reduction, for example) to provide counter narrative to the dominant neo-liberal discourses. If we had continued the practice for several years, the strategy might have been more successful than it was in accomplishing these purposes.

The third component of the strategy was to prepare the media for understanding information about the education system—especially complex information about the province’s testing program—by conducting technical briefings.¹⁷ Government had embarked upon a program of annual tests in reading, writing, and mathematics, as mentioned earlier. I knew that such tests were not well understood and that groups such as the Fraser Institute would misuse the information to discredit the education system and its employees. Therefore, I proposed, and my minister accepted, that I would conduct a technical briefing of the media prior to the release of the data and the minister would be available for interviews following that briefing.

Communications staff would arrange for a convenient site for the briefing and invite the media to attend. Ministry staff would help me to prepare for the briefing by assembling packages with interpretation guides and results, and preparing a slide set of the information we wished to convey.

We began the briefing by giving the media representatives an item similar to the ones to which the students had responded. We chose a mathematics problem at the grade-7 level, knowing that mathematics would be less familiar to the media than, say, an item from the reading

or writing assessments. Prior to providing the answer, I joked that we would not score their attempts to answer the item. We included information about confidence intervals, explained measurement error, talked about looking for trends over time, and summarized results.

The briefings were well attended by the media. But, because we only conducted two such briefings in advance of the release of the annual testing data, I cannot say whether the technical briefings were successful in promoting greater understanding of provincial assessment practices or story framing more favourable to the education system. My impression was that media representatives were somewhat more appreciative of the complexity of the issues than they had been.

Although it is dangerous to show favouritism in the provision of information to the media, governments will sometimes advance a story to a particular reporter. The motivations for such practices vary. Sometimes it is the desire to ensure that the first report is a fair representation of the issue. Other times it is to take advantage of a reporter's strengths, relative independence of editorial control, or some other strategic consideration. Advancing stories is not something one does frequently because the risk of alienating other news outlets is significant and can have unknown consequences. I won't say that stories were not advanced during my tenure as deputy minister, but the instances were relatively infrequent.

A problem affecting Canada with which all Canadian politicians must cope is Canada's proximity to the United States and the influence that information from US media exerts on Canadians. In the education domain, the most pernicious problem is the rhetorical spill-over of the dominant media messages about US education in the post WWII period: "America's schools are failing." When the Soviet Union surprised the world by launching Sputnik before the Americans, pundits and politicians in the United States framed the issue as failure of America's schools. According to the framing, the Soviet Union had won round one in the space race because US public schools had failed to prepare a sufficient number of graduates with knowledge of mathematics and science. America's public schools had made the United States *a nation at risk*, to use a current description of American education. Like the Cold War, Hollywood, McDonald's, and countless other things American, the

rhetoric of a nation at risk because of school failure overflowed into Canada.

Although that shoe does not fit Canada well – indeed it does not even fit the US comfortably – it is dangerous for Canadian politicians to question the applicability of such a claim to Canadian schools. After all, there is always room for “educational improvement,” by “raising the achievement bar,” and “promoting school success.” A politician who argues, “Our schools are doing just fine, thank you” is begging for negative attention by the media and heading for electoral trouble.

In political life, episodic urgent events can easily draw attention from more important and enduring issues. The temporal horizon of some politicians hardly extends beyond the daily six o’clock news. To make matters worse, as far as policy is concerned, there are no rewards for foresight or long-range thinking in political or bureaucratic life. As Hogwood and Gunn make clear:

There is a temptation for government to concentrate on current problems requiring action now rather than hypothetical problems where any adverse political effects of not taking action now will not occur until the future, and perhaps affect a different political party... because of the frequent reshuffling of ministerial posts, an individual minister also faces the temptation to concentrate on issues with an immediate impact, since “he knows that he will probably not be in the same post long and therefore not be held responsible for consequences of his policies” (Headley, 1974, 99). Similarly, civil servants are likely to have moved on before any hypothetical crisis actually materializes... [T]he rewards for foresight for both politicians and civil servants are negligible and are just as likely to be reaped by others as by those actually responsible for the anticipatory action.¹⁸ (p. 69)

Ever mindful of the electoral horizon, provincial politicians pursue educational agendas designed to give them visibility and produce few, if any, issues to be managed. The rhythm of electoral politics is not compatible with the need for sustained, systematic improvement and capacity building in education. This mismatch results in complicated education issues being ignored in favour of high-profile initiatives packaged to attract immediate attention.

CONCLUSION

Provincial governments and Canadian commercial media have capitalized on the predominant neo-liberal value matrix to construct mutually advantageous messages. Such messages fuel anxieties about the future, foster distrust of public schooling, and extol the virtues of individualism, choice, competition, productive efficiency, and private enterprise. The public's need to know about their schools is not well served by either governments or media that pander to anxieties and allow the urgent to obscure the important.

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² Levin, B. (2004) Media-government relations in education. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 19(3) 271-283.

³ I was appointed Deputy Minister of Education for British Columbia in November 1998 by a government that, two-years into its 5 year mandate, had become unpopular and was unlikely to be re-elected. I was fortunate, however, to be working in the only sector, education, that the public regarded as important and for which the government's approval rating was high.

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⁶ See, for example, OECD (2001) Knowledge and Skills for Life: First Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: Paris; OECD (2004) Learning for Tomorrow's World – First Results from PISA 2003

⁷ *Calgary Herald* (April 30, 2003) A Lesson Worth Learning. A12.

⁸ Wente, M. (August 29, 2002) 'They're turning my kids' education into a three-ring circus' *Globeandmail.com* (retrieved August 30, 2002)

⁹ Manoff, R. K. (1986) Writing the news (by telling the "story"). In Manoff, R. K. and M. Schudson (Eds.) *Reading the news*. New York: Pantheon Books. 197-229.

¹⁰ Hallin, D.C. (1988) Cartography, community, and the cold war. In Manoff, R. K. and M. Schudson (Eds.) *Reading the news*. New York: Pantheon Books.

¹¹ Sigel, L.V. (1986) Sources make the news. In Manoff, R. K. and M. Schudson (Eds.) *Reading the news*. New York: Pantheon Books 9-37.

¹² Concentration of media ownership in Canada has increased since the Davey Commission was empanelled to explore what, at the time, was averred to be the highest concentration of ownership of any democratic nation. The concentration of media ownership is complemented by homogeneity of editorial opinion that celebrates entrepreneurial capitalism, individual effort, and private philanthropy, and derogates those who seek a balance between individual and group rights, and accommodation between private enterprise and the public good. There are, of course, exceptions to what has been referred to as a neo-liberal friendly media, including internet-based political commentary that appeals to and reflects a different and, arguably, broader spectrum of political opinion. Special Senate Committee on Mass Media. Chaired by the Honourable Keith Davey. Report, Ottawa, 1970. Volume 1: "The Uncertain Mirror." (see also, Royal Commission on Newspapers, Report, Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1981; Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage: Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting. Ottawa: House of Commons 2003).

¹³ Sigel, L.V. (1986) Sources make the news. In Manoff, R. K. and M. Schudson (Eds.) *Reading the news*. New York: Pantheon Books 9-37.

¹⁴ Franklin, B. (2004) Education, education and indoctrination! Packaging politics and the three 'Rs'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 255-274; Gewirtz, S, Dickson, M. and S. Power (2004) Unraveling a 'spun' policy: a case study of the constitutive role of 'spin' in the education policy process. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 321-343.

¹⁵ Funds fail to fuel higher test scores, *The Globe and Mail*. August 30, 2002 A6

¹⁶ For example, the Fraser Institute argues that "the Canadian system of public education is inefficient and inadequate.... Over the past 30 years, our Ministries of Education have tinkered with a variety of reforms, including smaller classes and higher salaries, in an effort to improve the public education system. In doing so, they have tripled the real cost of education." The Fraser Institute would like the reader to infer that the cost of education has risen primarily as a consequence of higher salaries and smaller class sizes rather than

as a consequence of dramatic increases in the school-age population. The Fraser Institute hopes readers won't notice that Canada's fifteen year olds perform at the top of the industrialized countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Note, too, the use of the pejorative "tinkered" to describe the work of ministries of education.

¹⁷ Technical briefings are just one of a number of techniques that some deputies use to help the media understand issues; others include the provision of background documentation, meetings with editorial boards, and establishing confidential relationships with reporters, columnists, and editorial board writers.

¹⁸ Hogwood, B.W. and Lewis A. Gunn (1984) *Policy Analysis for the Real World*. Oxford University Press. 69.